

Address EMR Needs Proactively

By Connie Zicarelli

Editor's Note: Next month's issue of *Impact* is devoted to electronic medical records (EMR). This article is offered a month in advance to stimulate your thoughts so you can plan ahead about what to look for next month in the EMR issue.

The continued adoption of integrated electronic medical records (EMR) and practice management software (PMS) solutions promises to have a major influence on the course of private practice physical therapy in the future. For a healthy return on investment, EMR/PMS requires a solid foundation of systems and knowledge. It is important to identify the key components you need before making the switch to a more technologically dependent practice.

The first component to consider is clinical documentation. This includes having clinical staff that can document medical necessity, skilled care, and functional deficits. Demonstrating knowledge of rules and regulations for third party payers is a behavior that will be enhanced by an electronic documentation solution. The second component is having strong knowledge of both Current Procedural Technology (CPT) and International Classification of Diseases (ICD)-9 coding and use of modifiers in order to ensure that the EMR is assigning them correctly.

It's also important to establish a method of following up on outstanding accounts receivable. Software cannot make calls or appeal unpaid claims. Your administrative staff should have benchmarks and goals in place so that an electronic reminder, or "tickler" system, will make them more efficient and effective. Knowledge of your contracts with insurance companies and fee schedule maintenance is a must even after an EMR/PMS solution is in place. The final component to consider is accounting, which can include accounts payable and payroll functions.

With an electronic documentation component, the provider may spend less time documenting because ideally it can be done at the time services are rendered. This can help ensure that the documentation more accurately describes what happened at the visit, increasing efficiency and capturing all billable time. An electronic system also can be set to alert the provider and administrative team of potential compliance issues or requirements.

A fully integrated EMR/PMS solution can shorten the gap between the time services are rendered and when they are billed. It is becoming critical to combine an EMR into a billing software solution, as third party payers are moving toward accepting and paying only electronic claims. Establishing a behavior of timely documentation and weekly billing cycles will reduce the accounts receivable days outstanding and ultimately increase revenue.

Finally, an EMR/PMS software solution has the ability to provide streamlined clinic and administrative operations, but the system will be only as strong as the information put into it.



A clinic's EMR/PMS should not be thought of as the replacement for its operations and systems, but rather as a tool to enhance those systems. The success of a practice relies on integrating an EMR/PMS solution into an already prepared team that has a good track record of solid documentation principles and administrative behaviors.

The practice that spends time proactively on its systems will be more prepared to implement an EMR/PMS system. The practice will run more efficiently, decrease labor costs, and spend less time on redundant tasks. This, in turn, leads to a greater return on investment. An EMR/PMS will not fix any existing inefficiencies, will not make up for a lack of knowledge or skill—and in some cases, may expose these issues. The practice must take the time to ensure that a solid foundation is in place on which to build an effective and efficient EMR/PMS solution. ■

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